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Spaces Between: Towards Depolarized Readings of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

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BIG thanks to Sandy -- you rock, as in "on this rock I will build my [thesis]." Thanks to Pat, for honoring two whole semesters of me with patience and humor, to David for four years of patience and humor, and to Scott and American Romanticism for listening. Beck! Thanks for sending the space between sanity and insanity daily over the vax. Thanks to Laurel and Cindy for the vacation in the Southern Mists, Paul and Nina for the pink heart, Mom and Dad, you know, for everything. Thanks to Elena, Kate, Zoë, Walter, Eiren, Jen, Emily, Molly, Doug, Matt. . . and Paige, for the purple ribbon. I dedicate this paper to Holly. Without you I never would have made it through in one piece.

They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who "made of one blood all nations of men!" And then who are Africans? Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?

-- Harriet Jacobs
Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Jacobs'[1] *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* is a text which, written in a culture divided between polarities[2] of race and gender, has continued in the 130 years of its reception to traverse a landscape of mutably yet continually divided racisms and sexisms, changeably yet continually cloven raced and gendered identities. The text itself, due to the legally and socially constructed polar ontologies of race and gender in 19th century America, is torn between what can be said and what can't, what is true and what is false, what is black and what is white. The "tears" manifest themselves on all levels, from the text's ambiguous manipulation of the slave narrative genre and of the conventions of sentimentality, down to paradoxical statements housed in a single sentence. Readings of *Incidents* have also been torn. From acceptance at "face value," that is, that Jacobs was

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[1]Jacobs wrote *Incidents* under a pseudonym, "Linda Brent," and many writers choose to make a distinction between the writer and the narrative character. I recognize and find very interesting the importance of this distinction, and see it as pertinent to the ideas I will set out in this paper. However, for the sake of clarity, I have chosen to refer only to "Harriet Jacobs" throughout.

[2]There has been a great deal of recent theorizing about institutionalized polarities. Although lesbian and gay theories have very different grounds and goals than race theories, Judith Butler's discussion of how systems of polarity work has been the most helpful to my understanding. She describes how heterosexuality, in setting itself up as the norm and the origin, demands the existence of homosexuality as an opposite and a derivative: "The origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives" (Butler, p 22). A polarity, in other words, relies on an either/or system of extremes and oppositions and denies the possibility or existence of any sort of both/and middle ground. Diana Fuss, writing about lesbian and gay theory, speaks directly to the question of the fate of identities which lie between poles of understanding: "Where exactly, in this borderline sexual economy, does the one identity leave off and the other begin? And what gets left out of the inside/outside, heterosexual/homosexual opposition, an opposition which could at least plausibly be said to secure its seemingly inviolable dialectical structure only by assimilating and internalizing other sexualities (bisexuality, transvestism, trassexualism. . .) to its own rigid polar logic?" (Fuss, 2). Polarized understandings, in other words, make "invisible," or even negate, spaces between.

the black fugitive slave she claimed to be, to readings which understood it as a fiction by a white woman, to its recent recovery and revalorization as an "authentic" slave narrative, the text has been read in radically contradictory ways. This paper will be an examination of how the rendings and renderings in the text, and the rendings and renderings of the text as it has been read, suggest in the midst of their divisions *spaces between* polarities which have the potential to reveal those polarities' construction.[3] The text's many slippages between categorical understandings, in other words, suggest possible sites not of synthesis, but of ranges of understanding.

Antebellum American culture was, as contemporary American culture still is, built on dualistic understandings supported by law and language. "Race" has long been a cornerstone of this belief system for white Europeans and Americans, with "black" and "white" occupying opposite ends of the chain of being. Thus in 1862, Abraham Lincoln told a group of black leaders that "You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races" (Gates, 3). Never mind that these two "races," divided by the broadest distance Lincoln could imagine, mingled and mingled easily, mostly through the rape of slave

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[3]A very interesting discussion of the "difference between" *between* and *among* may be found in the *American Heritage Dictionary*: "*Between* is the only possible choice when only two entities are involved: *between* (never *among*) *good and evil*. . . When more than two entities are involved, the choice of *between* or *among* depends on the intended meaning. *Among* is used to indicate that an entity has been chosen from the members of a group: *the first among* (not *between*) *equals*. . . *Among* is also used to indicate a relation of inclusion in a group. . . *Between*, on the other hand, is used to indicate the area bounded by several points: *We have narrowed the search to the area between* (not *among*) *Philadelphia, Scranton, and New York*. In other cases either *between* or *among* may be used; . . . one may say either that *the boy was lost among the trees* ("in the area of the trees") or *between the trees* (in which case we infer that the trees hid the boy from sight)." This range of meaning, in which *between* encompasses a space in the middle of two polarities, circumscribes uncharted territory, and implies invisibility, all work together to make "*the space between*" a resonant metaphor for what I am trying to describe.

women by slave owners, to the point where Jacobs could ask the question, "who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves" (Jacobs, 43)? As Jacobs elsewhere points out, "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress, in either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death" (Jacobs, 27). In other words, it is the law which polarizes the understanding of race, not race which dictates the law. The words *black* and *white*, when applied to race, thus become not descriptions of actual appearance, but justifying metaphors for a system of legally sanctioned social tyranny. Categorical language, which supports and naturalizes social and legal constructions by eliding spectra of color and identity into polarized definitions of black/white,[4] thus creates an official ontology of the visible and the understandable, which is an ontology of polarity. This ontology must, in order to preserve its absolute bifurcation, "assimilate and internalize [other permutations of 'race']. . . "to its own rigid polar logic," as Fuss says of sexuality (Fuss, 2). Words and definitions thus function both to buttress legal interdictions, in this case the antebellum laws surrounding race, and as interdictions themselves, prohibit in their polarity the visibility of spaces between and sanction the constant reconstruction of dichotomized

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[4]Look at how Good/Evil, or Good vs. Evil, is written on the page. Something is needed to symbolize the words' polarity. This function is served by the versus symbol, or the virgule, which in French means comma, but which in English means, according to the dictionary, "the diagonal mark used to separate alternatives." The fact that something must exist between two words in order to establish their polarity, creates an image on the page not of two things, but of three: the two words, and a third thing that both unites them and defines them over against one another. The virgule, I would argue, is the physical reminder that there are spectra of meaning and colors between polar oppositions such as good/evil and black/white, which fluidly connect them and thereby undercut the logic which sets them in opposition. But the virgule is only a vestige, the condensation of variety into a diagonal mark which signifies and ossifies polarity. But as a vestige, this simple denotation destabilizes that opposition, simply because of its necessity. The need for the virgule suggests *the space between.*

understandings. Thus interdicted, the spaces between polarities are unsayable and invisible.

Invisibility is an extremely important aspect of spaces between. A spectrum of skin coloration may appear physically before the eyes, but the physical evidence that "race" is not a biological absolute was not and still isn't recognized or enacted culturally. Because interdicted into white/black poles, the racial spectrum was in fact conceptually invisible. Equally conceptually invisible were the varieties of intelligence, beauty, sexual appetite, etc., which were also polarized and assigned, depending on their desirability, to either "white" or "black." In antebellum America, the maintenance of these invisibilities under the rubric of the original black/white polarity was of utmost importance to the preservation of the metaphor of "race" which justified slavery. Not only voiced in the slave-states, polarizing justifications for slavery can be found in the works of European philosophers whose works were influential to or at least symptomatic of the white antebellum American mood.[5] In 1753 the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote: "I am apt to suspect the negroes. . . to be naturally inferior to the whites. . . . Such uniform and constant difference could not happen. . . if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men" (Gates, 10). Race, determined by skin color and features, is made immutable (one is white or "negroe") and a sign of "natural" status. Harriet Jacobs takes up this sort of logic and suggests, in doing so, the space between the poles of superior and inferior which reveals the way in which the enactment and reification of polar understandings is constructed by the slave system itself: "I admit the black man *is* inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in

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[5]Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses Hume and other European philosophers in his discussion of New World racism in his introduction to *"Race," Writing and Difference.*

which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. *They* do the work" (Jacobs, 44). By saying "inferiority" is a result of the laws of nature, Hume naturalizes a polarized understanding of race. Jacobs, by stating very clearly that "inferiority" is the result of the violent enactment of the laws of the state, suggests the range between "inferiority" and "superiority" which is the result of the social and legal subjugation of "black" Americans under "white" Americans. In Hume's formulation, cause and effect are made invisible through his naturalization of the results of subjugation into an understanding of "white" as superior, and "negroe" as inferior.[6]

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[6]Hume goes on to explain how "In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams, the Cambridge-educated poet who wrote verse in Latin]; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly" (Gates, 10). It is very interesting that Hume comes round to saying that any achievements "negroes" may have are simple "parrotings" of the achievements of their white "superiors." Although I won't be using him directly, Homi Bhabha's theories of colonial mimicry very definitely "ghost" this paper. Perhaps most important to my thinking has been his analysis of the never-closeable space between mimed and mimic, self and other. English colonials in India had a "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (126). This is related very importantly to Diana Fuss' understanding of the function of the homosexual Other in the homo/hetero polarity, in which homosexuality (analogous to but not the same as Bhabha's colonized mimic) "becomes the excluded; it stands in for, paradoxically, that which stands without. But the binary structure of sexual orientation, fundamentally a structure of exclusion and exteriorization, nonetheless constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic. The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion -- an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such" (Fuss, 3). The colonial and the colonized, the heterosexual and the homosexual, constitute polarities in which the obsessive articulation of "what is different" binds the two poles in an inextricable and incestuous relation in which mimicry plays an enormous role. But the whole comic tragedy is that mimicry can never become same. The closer it gets the more farcical the mimicry becomes, because to close the gap would be to destroy the polarity, as I have suggested by contrasting Hume's and Jacob's understandings of the

If spaces between are spectra of color and identity made invisible by their constant rupture and elision into polarized understandings, then the inability to see spaces between can be understood as a linguistically and legally institutionalized blind spot. Just as the side-mirror in a car can erase a truck, showing instead a stretch of smooth highway, so the antebellum understanding of race served to erase the link which connects "black" to "white." In this case, however, the blind spot is not that which can't be physically seen with the eye, but the rift legal and linguistic polarizing interdictions create in the smooth spectrum which the eye perceives.

"Miscegenation" or, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, "The interbreeding of what are presumed to be distinct human races," was one of the factors most unsettling to the constant maintenance of the blind spot and the resulting repolarization of "race" in America. For example, Karen Sánchez-Eppler describes the problem which miscegenation created for the antebellum understanding of race, and the answer language provided: "The less easily race can be read from his or her flesh, the more clearly the white man's repeated penetrations of the black body are imprinted there. The quadroon's one-fourth blackness represents two generations of miscegenating intercourse, the octoroon's three -- their numerical names attesting to society's desire to keep track of an ever less visible black ancestry even at the cost of counting the generations of institutionalized sexual exploitation" (40).

"inferiority" of the slave. Bhabha tells how British colonials wanted "'a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern -- a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' -- in other words, a mimic man raised 'through our English school. . . to form a corps of translators. . .' He [the mimic man] is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (Bhabha, 128). A metaphor which has helped me envision this is Xeno's paradox, which points out that because space is infinitely divisible in half, then objects should never meet, because space can never be fully spanned.

"Numerical names" insured that a pale "black" body remain on the "black" side of the racial dichotomy, thus making conceptually invisible the spectrum of color.

The polarity of race was inscribed not only into language, but into law. In the antebellum South, a law dating to a 1662 Virginia statute insured that light skinned "blacks" would remain safely enslaved, providing that children "got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother" (Higgenbotham, 44). The question miscegenation raised regarding race classification was thus answered, since the vast majority of "mulattos" were the result of the rape of slave women by white men. After emancipation this answer was no longer possible, and numerical laws were drafted, defining race based on fractions: "In 1879 Virginia defined a Negro as possessing one-fourth or more of Negro blood. By 1910. . . the law was amended to include as Negroes all who had one-sixteenth or more Negro blood. . . the law was amended -- in 1930 -- to read that every person in whom there is 'ascertainable any Negro blood shall be deemed and taken to be a colored person'" (Franklin, 34).[7] Thus, the space between racial polarities was made invisible through linguistic and legal interdiction, resulting in a collective cultural blind spot which refused and

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[7]Higgenbotham notes that these attitudes surrounding the fear of miscegenation and the need to define race are not by any means antique, "for it was not until 1967 that the United States Supreme Court finally declared unconstitutional those statutes prohibiting interracial marriages. The Supreme Court waited thirteen years after its *Brown* decision dealing with desegregation in schools before, in *Loving v. Virginia*, it agreed to consider the issue of interracial marriages. Many commentators have suggested that the issue of interracial marriage was far more explosive than even the maelstrom involved over integrated education. . . In the celebrated Loving case the Virginia trial judge in January, 1959 stated his legal rationale justifying the constitutionality of the prohibition against interracial marriages as follows: 'Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and He placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with His arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that He separated the races shows that He did not intend for the races to mix'" (41-42).

still to a large extent refuses to see "race" and the often violent prejudice which that metaphor "justifies" as an epistemological and social construction which has been passed down from the institution of American and Caribbean slavery.

But even if the polarity of race is produced and reproduced through linguistic and legal interdictions, and even if spaces between are thereby made unsayable and invisible, these very sites of interdiction are still the weakest points in the logic of polarized understandings. Laws can reify the categorical construction of race. Categorical language creates official definitions and therefore ontologies of what can be conceptually seen by dominant "whites" and actually lived by subjugated "blacks." But the polarity of these laws and words suggest spaces between, which Harriet Jacobs, writing from the categorized position of a black fugitive slave, can suggest. As I have already shown, she uses one of the fundamental polarizing justifications for slavery, "admit[ting] the black man *is* inferior." But rather than stopping there, she asks the all-important question, "what is it that makes him so?", thus deconstructing the polarity to show that this cornerstone justification of slavery is a construction of the slave system itself.

The example I just cited is exceptionally straightforward. That the slave system was brutalizing and dehumanizing was more palatable to a white female abolitionist audience than the aspects of Jacobs' story which deal with sexuality, miscegenation, and the resulting destabilization of black/white as reliable identity categories. In these cases she cannot simply make visible the spaces between and thus illuminate the blind spot, because the white female audience for which she writes was grounded in official ontologies which forbade explicit discussion of the sexual abuse resulting in "miscegenation" and whose polarized understanding of race produced a blind

spot to the conceptual instability potentially produced by that same miscegenation.[8] Rather, Jacobs can only suggest non-polarized understandings *inter dicta,*[9] or in the slippage and ambiguity between the words which, used categorically, function as the repolarizing interdictions she must combat. In other words, Jacobs must both reproduce official language and acceptable form, and use the ambiguity which language and form creates to subvert polarities and suggest spaces between.

I use the word *suggest* as opposed to *reveal* because what cannot be directly expressed remains invisible insofar as it has no official ontology. The text does not reveal spectra of understanding because what is "seen" once one realizes the importance of "looking" inter dicta, is not the "content" of spaces between which have been made invisible by epistemological categories. Rather it is the existence of the *blind spot* , the fact of one's *inability* to see spectra, due to the polarized understandings and ontologies of American culture, which is suggested.[10] The irony is that this is an act of looking which is impossible.[11] How can a blind spot remain blind if one looks at it? One

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[8]For a discussion of "the cult of true womanhood" as it affected and was affected by "race," see footnote #25

[9]The interesting word play of interdiction and inter dicta is used by Bhabha to a different end in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," p. 30.

[10]The text does not disguise its "true" meaning under a cloak of "white women's" language and literary form, cunningly leaving clues for the insightful reader to follow. Rather I think a great deal of the text's power lies not outside, but *in* its ability to use categorical language and form to suggest possible spectra between the polarized understandings which governed antebellum America and which have governed America in different ways ever since.

[11]We tend, and this tendency resonates with the constant repolarization of race in America, to think of the opposite of vision as "blackness" or "darkness." This is not the case. Blindness has nothing to do with blackness. Blackness is an extreme on a spectrum of color and light, a visual experience. When I was four I lost the sight in my right eye. For a week my brain tried to process the information sent by one seeing and one blind eye. But the messages my blinded eye sent were incomprehensible: "there is nothing -- not brightness or darkness -- nothing." Blindness. Our language has no way to describe the sensation of "seeing" nothing. For a week I refused to leave my mother's side. I wouldn't let her go out of the house. Luckily for both of us my brain began to refuse the blind eye's signals. I now only "see" with my left eye. Whatever it is my blind eye

can only suggest it. Outline it. The possible function which the space between has in this text, then, is located not within it, but in the act of *trying* to look at it, *trying* to suggest it.

The importance and complicated ramifications of spaces between and blind spots are realized spatially and physically, not just conceptually, in the text. For seven years Jacobs sits hidden in her grandmother's attic crawlspace. The attic lies between slavery and freedom in that while she hides there Jacobs is no longer subject to her owner, Dr. Flint. But, in that the space is so tiny that her limbs atrophy from disuse, she is also not free. As both a stepping-stone to freedom and as a prison, the attic is a physical manifestation of the space between the mutually exclusive conditions of slavery and freedom. The space is invisible not because the shape of the attic can't be seen from the street, but because it is so tiny that no one would ever think that a woman could survive there. Jacobs can see out of the attic, and from that position she can observe the operations of the slave community from a vantage point which is neither within slavery nor outside of it.

That Jacobs' physical body inhabits a manifestation of the space between is not surprising. American slavery was, in its economic purposes, an institution of the body. The slave's *body* was commodified and worked, in the field, the house, and in the reproduction of the slave population. The reasons for the enslavement of black Africans by white Europeans and

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experiences has been erased from my consciousness. Sometimes I close my seeing eye and "look" at my blindness. But what I see is the dark inside of my seeing eye's eyelid. There is nothing to the right -- neither brightness nor it's visual opposite, darkness -- nothing. It is impossible for me to look at, and impossible for me to describe. The metaphor of the blind spot does not match perfectly the physical blindness of an eye -- the eye can be seen and cannot see, the blind spot cannot be seen, but can see. I have included this footnote, therefore, not to strengthen the metaphor I've chosen, but to attempt, and in attempting show its impossibility, to describe blindness itself.

Americans are complicated and not reducible to an original antagonism of white against black. Rather, the shift in European and African societies from ancient and early medieval slave systems based on criteria other than race, to the mass enslavement of Africans by Europeans and white Americans in the modern world, gave rise to the construction of a polarized understanding of black and white which served, and still serves, to justify the subjugation of those bodies designated "black" by those designated "white."[12] The racialized "black" body[13] became, thereby, the site of categorically controlling definitions, from the overarching definition of "slave," to stereotypes and constructions of racial characteristics whose implications reached, and reach, far beyond the body, into the minds and thought-processes of both blacks and whites.

Harriet Jacobs' body was defined and therefore treated as enslaved in a culture where enslavement was supposedly based on mutually exclusive racial characteristics whose unmistakable sign was "black" skin color as opposed to its "opposite," "white" skin color. But Harriet Jacobs was a very light skinned "black" woman.[14] She defines herself as a mulatto on the first

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[12]The history of the development of modern racism is well documented. I learned about it in 1989 in Stephen Volk's lecture class, "The History of The Caribbean."

[13]As opposed to the white body which often is not culturally seen and does not see itself as raced. Hazel Carby speaks beautifully to the need to recognize "race" as affecting black and white, in an explanation of *Reconstructing Womanhood* which was fundamental to my thinking about this paper: "This book works within the theoretical premises of societies 'structured in dominance' by class, by race, and by gender and is a materialist account of the cultural production of black women intellectuals within the social relations that inscribed them. It delineates the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and black women 'lived' their relation to their material conditions of existence. . . We need more feminist work that interrogates sexual ideologies for their racial specificity and acknowledges whiteness, not just blackness, as a racial categorization. Work that uses race as a central category does not necessarily need to be about black women" (Carby, 17-18).

[14]I recently went up to an acquaintance in the Féve and asked her what was up. She said she had to finish reading a book in time for a class, and to my surprise she pulled out a much newer and less beat up copy of the same edition of *Incidents* which I had in my bag.

page, and later in the book she's described by a "grim-looking [poor white] fellow" as "Dis 'ere yaller gal" (Jacobs, 65). Jacobs' skin, as a physical manifestation of the mutability of race, stood for herself and for generations of her readers "as a bodily challenge to the conventions of reading the body. . . simultaneously insisting that the body is a sign of identity and undermining the assurance with which that sign can be read," as Karen Sánchez-Eppler puts it (Sánchez-Eppler, 41). In other words, Jacobs' body, in a slave culture whose logic was threatened by the discrepancy between race as a immutable polarity and the spectra of color perceivable on the faces and bodies of human beings, suggests in itself a conceptual space between. It is, at the most basic level, Jacobs' body which is made invisible by the blind spot. And it is that invisible space from which the constructedness of race might be "seen," which the text asks the reader to look for at every turn. But, as I will show, the space between racial dichotomies, which is made manifest on her body, cannot be suggested by that body. It is when the body is textualized by Jacobs herself that alternatives to "the [polarized] conventions of reading the body" can be suggested.

Take, for example, the passage from *Incidents* which I have quoted as an epigraph. The passage follows a forceful indictment (and I intend all the resonances that word has accrued) of the hypocrisy of "Yankees" who, reviled by Southern planters, still "consent to do the vilest work for them, such as the ferocious bloodhounds and the despised negro-hunters are employed to do at home." Because of the Fugitive Slave Law, this condemnation has very broad scope: all the Northern states and their "law-abiding" citizens are implicated. Jacobs' outlining of the complicity of Northerners with Southern

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I said, "Wow, that's crazy -- I'm writing my thesis on that book." She said, "well then you can tell me. Why did they put this photograph of a white woman on the cover?"

slavery serves to destabilize the American polarity of North and South,[15] and to condemn Northerners as well as Southerners for the peculiar form of racism outlined in the dramatic statement which follows: "They seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves. What a libel upon the heavenly Father, who 'made of one blood all nations of men!'" Having established the contradiction between what slaveholding "Christians" understood of God's will, and what God "actually" intended, Jacobs follows the logic of "one blood" to the question, "And then who are Africans?" This could mean, if all people are of one blood, what is race? Does it exist? She then asks, "Who can measure the amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?" Following right behind her own question which seems to destabilize the existence of race at all, Jacobs reiterates a dichotomized definition of race, creating a category of "Anglo-Saxon blood." But she does this only to remind the reader that that self-same and supposedly pure blood is "coursing," and, although she does not remind the reader of this, coursing as the direct result of the institutionalized rape of black women by white men, "in the veins of American slaves." Jacobs thus outlines the contradiction between the polarity of race as it is constructed and reinforced in America, and the spectrum of color as it appears on people's bodies, due partly to what is called miscegenation. But the truly subversive aspect of this little paragraph lies in the word "who."[16] We have a contradictory system, Jacobs explains. The problem lies in the body and in the blood. *Who* , which body, can sort it out? *Who* is going to point out, to make visible, "the amount of Anglo-Saxon

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[15]This is not an unusual tactic in abolitionist literature. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe do the same thing.

[16]Thanks to Paige Sarlin for recognizing the potential of this word.

blood coursing in the veins of American slaves" (Jacobs, 44)? Her question is a rhetorical one, serving to bolster God's Word: no one can measure it, because it is one blood. But the question also begs for the answer, "Harriet Jacobs." For even in pointing out the contradiction between race as a constructed polarity and race as physically mutable, she has established herself as the revealer of racial injustice and misunderstanding. Also, and even more importantly, Harriet Jacobs is herself an American slave whose veins flow with Anglo-Saxon blood. She is, in her very own body, a measurement of the amount. She stands, at the most basic and bodily level, between, in the conceptual and ontological space made invisible by the polarized construction of race.

As the sign and site of her identity, the racial invisibility of Jacobs' body creates a ripple effect, problematizing other dichotomized constructions and understandings out of which she writes. Of critical importance, because the text is advertised as "truth," is the polarity of truth and falsehood. Written for a white audience, *Incidents* must on the one hand present itself as "strictly true," in order to "arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage" (Jacobs, 1). On the other hand, as Jacobs' editor, Lydia Maria Child, indicates with a subtle sarcasm, Jacobs' sexual experiences "belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate." Either way, the "wrongs [are] so foul, that our [white women's] ears are too delicate to listen to them" (Jacobs, 4). Child points to the ironic polarity of "delicacy" vs. "indelicacy." The two words appear to be opposites, but in fact they achieve exactly the same goal. By claiming that sexual abuse is either too delicate or too indelicate for white women's ears, the need to discuss abuse is nullified. White rape of slave women, which is the subject at hand, conveniently becomes invisible,

unsayable, and thereby untrue. But rape, the reality of which is told by Jacobs' light-skinned body, and the threat of which is used against that body, is one of the truths which Jacobs has to tell. Jacobs' genealogy and her sexual history, in other words, already place her between the constructed polarity of truth and falsehood, even before she begins to write what she wishes to set forth as truth.

How can Jacobs write truth from a place between white antebellum society's construction of truth and falsehood? Hazel Carby, writing about the difficulty black women had in representing their sexuality in antebellum American, describes the problem perfectly: "narratives by black women embody the tension between the author's desire to privilege her experience, and being able to speak only within a discourse of conventionally held beliefs about the nature of black womanhood" (Carby, 22).[17] Carby locates the tension *between* what needs to be said and what can be said. The author's experiences can only be expressed in the language of conventional truth. What occurs, therefore, is not a reverse-discourse,[18] but an oscillation between conceptual poles, much as a sailing ship makes use of prevailing winds by tacking back and forth across the course it follows. I am not saying

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[17]See footnote #25 for Carby's outline of the way in which black and white womanhoods were defined over against one another, with black womanhood negatively defined at every turn.

[18]Judith Butler outlines the difference between reverse-discourse and invisibility quite nicely: "Here it becomes important to recognize that oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects -- abjects, we might call them -- who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. . . To be prohibited explicitly is to occupy a discursive site from which something like reverse-discourse can be articulated; to be implicitly proscribed is not even to qualify as an act of prohibition (Butler, 20). The invisibility/inarticulation of the mulatta in ante-bellum literature and culture is complicated in different ways than the invisibility/inarticulation of the lesbian in contemporary America, but I find this discussion nevertheless helpful in understanding the invisibility and silence of spaces between.

that Harriet Jacobs consciously delineated a space between in this manner. I am saying that the ambiguities which many readers, of whom I will examine three representative ones, have pointed out in the text serve to encompass spaces between the controlling and defining polarities of race and truth.

This constant slippage and ambiguity raise questions of authority.[19] From its writing to its present-day reception, readings of *Incidents* have been obsessed with its authority, from the question of "is this story true," to "who actually wrote it," to "to whom does the text speak" to "who owns it." The persistence of this concern serves to point up the existence and continued effect of the text's ability to slip out from under authoritarian categories. I will examine three readings of the text, chosen for their historical and representative positions as well as for their dramatic effect: an 1861 review, John Blassingame's 1972 dismissal of the text as "fiction," and Joanne M. Braxton's 1986 response, after the "authenticity" of Incidents was re-established. If the subversive potential of the text lies in spaces between which cannot be seen or articulated, how can and should authority, in all its

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[19] *Authority* is an extremely complicated word, and I mean to use it as such. Gilbert and Gubar quote Edward Said's discussion of the word in *The Madwoman in The Attic*: "*Authority* suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings . . . .'a power to enforce obedience,' or 'a derived or delegated power,' or 'a power to inspire belief,' or 'a person whose opinion is accepted' . . . .a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements. . . .an increaser and thus a founder. *Auctoritas* is production, invention, cause, in addition to meaning a right of possession. Finally, it means continuance, or a causing to continue. Taken together these meanings are all grounded in the following notions: (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish -- in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course" (Gilbert and Gubar, 4). Gilbert and Gubar discuss very helpfully how these definitions do not work for and in fact work against [white] women authors. If we recognize that the four concepts Said identifies are grounded are precisely those notions, or rights, which are legally denied the slave, in particular the slave mother whose children [and perhaps by extension, whose "narratives"] are not hers to "author," then the word potentially has different and very specifically harmful dysfunctions in the Afro-American woman author's experience, especially the woman slave narrator.

meanings, be granted and/or claimed by the text? The construction of race has the authority of an interdiction: one is either black or white. Equally, our understanding of veracity has the authority of an interdiction: something is either true or it is false. But if a text functions between polarities, if it resonates "inter dicta," or between the lines, what happens to race? To veracity? To authority?[20] Readers have, at different times, offered different and often contradictory answers to these questions.

* * *

Harriet Jacobs' body functions at a base level to suggest the space between. In its appearance, her body denies the "logic" of the polarization of race. Harriet Jacobs' darker-than-"white" skin, or more appropriately, her African ancestry, designates her a slave. Her lighter-than-"black" skin, which reveals her European ancestry, serves as living proof of the existence of miscegenation and therefore of the possibility of the passage across generations between supposedly "opposite" races. Because she was a woman, Jacobs' body had the very specific function within the slave economy of producing more slaves. Thus, both as the site of past miscegenations, and as the potential producer of more in-between bodies, Jacobs' female, light-skinned body can be seen to function as a fundamental threat to the

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[20]Homi Bhabha has very strongly influenced me in my thinking about the importance of authority in a text like this. He writes: "The visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them. The question of representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority" (Bhabha, 126).

dichotomized construction of race on which the justifications for slavery were built.

There is, however, a discrepancy between the body's experience as enslaved, and the constructedness of race which that body's light skin helps to reveal. The spectrum which Jacobs' body advertised, while it may have affected the way in she was treated, possibly making her more of a sexual commodity in the eyes of her white master, did not affect the fact that she lived as a slave and her body was used as such.

Jacobs recognizes the ironies of the discrepancy between the spectrum of color as it appears before the eyes and the polarity of race as it was enforced in antebellum America. Describing her Uncle Benjamin's escape, she writes, "For once his white face did him a kindly service. They had no suspicion that it belonged to a slave; otherwise the law would have been followed out to the letter, and the *thing* rendered back to slavery" (24). She describes her uncle's "passing" as a bitter joke on whites who believe that they can read race but instead are "slaves" to the polarized understanding of race. Also in reference to her uncle she makes a veiled commentary on her own position as a light-skinned slave woman. Describing Benjamin after his months in jail, she writes, "Long confinement had made his face too pale; his form too thin." But a slave-trader, seeing Benjamin in that state, "said he would give any price if the handsome lad was a girl. We thanked God that he was not" (23). Jacobs does not, in discussing the sexual desire of either her master, Dr. Flint, or her white lover, Mr. Sands, make reference to her skin color, but the anger she feels is quite clear in this reference to her uncle, in which his paleness is made unnatural by confinement, and then sexualized in that heightened state by the slaveholder's gender-bending gaze. "We thanked God he was not [a girl]," because while whiteness, according to the polarized construction of

race, is a sign of freedom, and for women bearing that sign, of purity and true womanhood, one of the many fallacies in the construction of race is that the "whiter" the "black" woman the more sexually desirable and therefore valuable she is to white men.[21] The body of Harriet Jacobs, therefore, is a very complicated "thing." It defines her as a slave, is commodified by slavery, and, in its light skin, both delineates a space between black and white which undermines that construction and serves, sexually, to commodify her still further.

In her lived experience, then, Jacobs' light-skinned body does nothing to assuage her situation as a slave.[22] But there is a radical difference between Jacobs' lived experience as a slave defining, defined by and occupying her body, and her very carefully constructed text designed for a white audience which, albeit abolitionist, was as saturated with the polarized construction of race as those who lived south of the Mason-Dixon line. Writing about conventions of reading in antebellum America, Karen Sánchez-Eppler describes how "the bodies of women and slaves were read against them. . . for

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[21]James Norcom, the real name of Dr. Flint, ran an advertisement in the *American Beacon* of July 4, 1835, for the capture of Harriet Jacobs. He described her thus: "She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight" (*Incidents*, 215). A description of Jacobs' body is of utmost importance to a potential slave-catcher. Jacobs' body is of utmost importance to Norcom who, according to Jacobs, desires her both as property and sexually. Ironically, contained within his description of that body is the acknowledgement of its racial ambiguity. That ambiguity, however, is a blind-spot, looked at but not seen. On a personal and entirely subjective note, this description made my skin crawl, because, having read Jacobs, I could smell in Norcom's description of the body he considered his, and in his assertion that "this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause of provocation," the utter complacency and assurance of someone who thinks, knows he's right. Someone for whom rape and torture are as common and unremarkable as a plate of eggs.

[22]"Passing," in fact, is an answer to the problem of race relations which she finds at best grimly amusing, as with her uncle's experience, at worst, despicable: "I knew this colored man had spent many nights hunting for me. Every body knew he had the blood of a slave father in his veins; but for the sake of passing himself off for white, he was ready to kiss the slaveholder's feet. How I despised him" (119)!

both the human body was seen to function as the foundation not only of a general subjection but also of a specific exclusion from political discourse" (30). But when Jacobs moves from a situation in which her body represents her to one in which she is representing her own body in writing, she is able to engage in a "political discourse." Sánchez-Eppler explains how "For women and slaves the ability to speak was predicated upon the reinterpretation of their flesh. . . Transformed from a silent site of oppression into a symbol of that oppression, the body becomes within both feminist and abolitionist discourses a means of gaining rhetorical force" (30). The difference thus lies in how Jacobs' body is misused as a living, breathing organism, and the rhetorical potential which that body's representation has, through Jacobs' own inscription of its experiences into text. The hypocrisy of the slave system may have been manifest on her body, but her body still lived as a slave to that hypocrisy. It is in her text, where she represents bodies using the very words which name bodies, that she is able to suggest the space between.

How does she do this? Of utmost importance is the fact that she cannot use words at their face value, for it is her own "face's value" which words define. When she begins to represent her face and body in text, she can accentuate the gaps occasioned by the slippages and the ambiguities of the play of words to suggest spaces between institutionalized polarities of thought and understanding. For example, after describing the brutal wave of white terrorism which followed Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, Jacobs writes that "No two people that had the slightest tinge of color in their faces dared to be seen walking together" (Jacobs, 64). This sentence is divided between the sarcastic tone in which Jacobs writes "the slightest tinge of color" and the ominous warning that such people "dared [not] be seen walking together." She thus points out both the mutability of race, and the bloody way in which "the

slightest tinge of color" was forced to the persecuted "black" side of the racial polarity. The irony is that "the slightest tinge of color," a phrase which she so beautifully uses in the text to invoke the spectrum which unites and therefore conceptually negates the polarity of race, could not, as an actual physical manifestation outside the text, invoke that spectrum, and in fact invoked racist violence. The polarized construction of race is lived by the bodies of all slaves, regardless of their color,[23] but textuality allows Jacobs to reconstruct bodies for her readership, and in doing so, to show how race is constructed and reified by the slave system.

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[23]In her chapter "Fear of Insurrection" Jacobs explores the ironies of the construction of race by flipping the characteristics which "black" and "white" are expected to signify through a description of the expectations which poor whites had of blacks. In her description of poor whites Jacobs demonstrates that the low levels of intelligence and social grace assumed to accrue to "black" skin are not reflections of "race" at all, but of class. The chapter is an account of the wave of white terrorism which followed Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. "Low [poor] whites" (Jacobs, 63) are described as looting and terrorizing the slave and free black population. When the poor whites are actually in Jacobs' grandmother's house and going through her possessions, they come across bedding and table cloths. "Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf? . . . White folks oughter have 'em all" (Jacobs, 65). This passage is striking because by using dialect to make the poor whites appear far less cultured than her slave family, Jacobs disrupts convention; the whites, rather than the blacks, are represented as linguistically ignorant, an important strategy if the power of language as interdiction is remembered. The passage is also important because the speakers' surprise reveals the distance between the expectations of what "black" and "white" mean in terms of material comfort, and the possible realities. The speaker makes two distinctions in his speech, between "niggers" and "white folks," and between people with sheets and people without. In his mind, these two polarities ought to have a logical relationship to one another. But, as Jacobs suggests, the two poles are only related in so far as that relationship is brutally enforced. This distinction is also made early in this chapter in one of Jacobs' most incisive and straight-forward condemnations of the slave system. She writes of the "low whites" brutality: "They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation" (Jacobs, 64). Jacobs could easily have garnered "sympathy" for her cause had she portrayed the brutality of the poor whites as purely a function of their race. But by naming the common denominator of oppression as "power" rather than "race," Jacobs subtilely deconstructs race itself, suggesting instead that poor whites and enslaved blacks have a common enemy in the planter class.

The textualization of the body is also important due to antebellum implications of the act of writing. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discusses in his introduction to *"Race," Writing, and Difference,* the ability to write was seen by white Europeans and Americans as synonymous with the ability to reason. Africans were considered inferior because, according to white writers, "they had developed no systems of writing and had not mastered the art of writing in European languages" (Gates, 11). This philosophical belief was, of course, bolstered not by a "natural" scale of intelligence based on "race," but by the laws of slaveholding nations, which made illegal slave literacy. Thus the use of the written word, and therefore the representation of slaves and free blacks through the written word, became the legally enforced exclusive terrain of white writers. But, as Gates points out, "Black people responded to these profoundly serious allegations about their 'nature' as directly as they could: they wrote books, poetry, autobiographical narratives" (Gates, 11). But, as antebellum black writers addressing white audiences found, using the language and forms which many white writers used to represent and define blacks negatively was extremely restricting. Much subversive content was forced inter dicta, or between words, between lines, between rules. To look one last time at her description of her uncle, Jacobs clearly understands the potentially negative power of language. "The letter of the law," in naming a "black" man a "thing," serves to constantly reify the polarized construction of race. But if words and names are thus interdicted against the body, Jacobs uses that same language in a way that she cannot use her body: "For once his white face did him a kindly service." The bitter phrase "for once" implies that a "white face," while supposedly situating one on the "free" side of the polarity, is in fact a sign which doesn't help the slave, whose slave status is based metaphorically on skin color but legally on "the condition of the

mother." The next phrase, "They had no suspicion that it [his face] belonged to a slave," condemns the understanding of race which sees "white" as free and "black" as enslaved, and which upholds a contradictory system whereby Benjamin's white face is named "black" and therefore slave. The status of *slave* in these two sentences is revealed to have no founding in a biological racial duality. Rather, the interdictions of law and the legalized categorical language of "race" construct the slave system: "Otherwise, the law would have been carried out to the letter, and the *thing* rendered back to slavery." Thus Jacobs leads us from Benjamin's "white face" which, according to the skewed logic of the polarized construction of race, should make him a free *man,* to the legality of slavery which sees the children of slave mothers as *things,* regardless of color. Law and the power of categorical language become the target of Jacobs' deconstructive capacities. As she indicates using the common phrase, "the letter of the law," law is composed of words, and words are composed of letters. The law, its constructedness revealed, is as perverse as the polarized understanding of race which naturalizes law. One could say that Harriet Jacobs carries the law out to the letter in that she tears its language, its letters, apart to reveal the tragically absurd power of categories which allow a human being to be defined as a thing.[24] Thus, by using the language which, as Gates has shown, often negatively defined her body, Jacobs can suggest the constructedness and the logic of the legally and linguistically interdicted system which enslaves her body.

These sentence to sentence suggestions of spaces between extend to Jacobs' use of genre and the conventions of sentimentality, and the way in

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[24]The title of her chapter on her uncle, "The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man," uses the constructed polarity of the words "slave" and "man," one of the fundamental justifications for slavery being that black men are not, in fact, men but a lower form of life, to suggest by simply showcasing the polarity, the space between those poles.

which she positions herself as author. As a text attempting to communicate the horror of the American slave system to a white female audience deeply initiated into the cult of true womanhood, *Incidents* must negotiate tricky territory regarding issues of sex and race relations.[25] The first sentence of Jacobs' preface says a great deal about how her body as reconstructed in the text and her role as the author of that text, functioned as intermediaries between the poles of black and white as they were understood in antebellum America. "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" (Jacobs, 1). This famous sentence contains within it the complex and often contradictory system of constructed identities and assumptions which Jacobs, as a "black" female fugitive slave writing for a "white" female abolitionist audience, had to negotiate.

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[25]Hazel Carby provides a stunning analyses of the cult of true womanhood and the effect it had on white and black understanding of black female sexuality: "The dominating ideology to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820s until the Civil War was the 'cult of true womanhood.' Barbara Welter, a feminist historian, has characterized its basic tenets: 'the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues -- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. . . . With them she was promised happiness and power.' . . . The parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character and therefore provided an easily discernible indicator of the function of a female of the human species. . . . While fragility was valorized as the ideal sate of woman, heavy labor required other physical attributes. Strength and ability to bear fatigue, argued to be so distasteful a presence in a white woman, were positive features to be emphasized in the promotion and selling of a black female field hand a slave auction. . . .To qualify as a "true woman." the possession of virtue was an imperative. . . . Overt sexuality, on the other hand, emerged in the images of the black woman, where 'charm' revealed its relation to the dark forces of evil and magic. . . . Thus, the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat tho the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress. . . . Any historical investigation of the ideological boundaries of the cult of true womanhood is a sterile field without a recognition of the dialectical relationship with the alternative sexual code associated with the black woman. Existing outside the definition of true womanhood, black female sexuality was nevertheless used to define what those boundaries were. The contradictions at a material and ideological level can clearly be seen in the dichotomy between repressed and overt representations of sexuality" (Carby, 23-30).

That Jacobs chooses to call her book a "narrative" is significant, since *Incidents* is not a slave "narrative" in the traditional sense. The most famous and influential narratives were written by fugitive slaves themselves, but the majority of slave narratives and interviews with fugitive slaves were "narrated" to a white abolitionist scribe, who functioned as a mediating and authenticating buffer between the story of the slave and the white audience which was to hear it.[26] Jean Fagan Yellin, in her analysis of anti-slavery emblems, *Women and Sisters*, explicates the function of this mediating and authenticating presence. A popular anti-slavery emblem was that of the slave woman bound in chains, kneeling before the white female figure of Liberty or Justice. "With the inclusion of an empowered white chain-breaking liberator, the enchained black supplicants are seen as powerless. The appearance of the chain-breaker between slave and slaveholder makes it unnecessary for the slaves to rise and break their own chains." In other words, the presence of the "liberator" takes away any agency the slave may have, thereby making the slave safe to both abolitionist and slaveholding whites. The white liberator functions as a benevolent and helpful presence to the kneeling black woman, whose potential power her benevolence negates. Her benevolence promises a

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[26]Narratives written by fugitive slaves have survived the abolitionist era as literature interesting for other reasons. As literature directed to a white abolitionist audience, however, the slave narrative written by the fugitive him or herself was one of many forms, now almost completely obscure, most of which were written by white writers for white readers. From articles in *The National Antislavery Standard*, to short stories published in annual women's publication, *The Liberty Bell*, the vast majority, or the pulp, if you will, of abolitionist literature, was written by whites for whites. Although self-written narratives such as Jacobs' and Douglass' attracted and continue to attract far more attention than the proliferation of white abolitionist propaganda, the white audience which originally received Jacobs' text was indoctrinated by that white abolitionist propaganda. For more information on the way this white on white literature represented and used the "subject" of the black slave, see Sánchez-Eppler, Yellin, and Grimm.

smooth transition from slavery to "freedom," as long as freedom does not mean "equality," but continues black dependance on white benevolence.

In 1837 the First Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women gave a formal endorsement to the use of such emblems, hoping "that the speechless agony of the fettered slave may unceasingly appeal to the heart of the patriot, the philanthropist and the christian [sic]" (Yellin, 5). Yellin wonders, "did the freeborn white abolitionist feminists see their task as speaking for the 'voiceless' slave? Did they see it as enabling the slave to sound her own voice on the platform and in print?" (Yellin, 25) One answer lies in the fact that a figure similar to white-skinned Justice, a benevolent white abolitionist scribe, was necessary to mediate not between the slave narrator and the slave-holding South, but between the narrator and her "sympathetic" audience of northern white women. The "speechless agony," in other words, was not speechless -- fugitive slaves were ready and willing to tell their stories. But these stories as they were presented in the genre of the slave narrative were highly edited and molded for white consumption.

Although the white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child had a hand in editing *Incidents*, and although it is framed by Child's "authenticating" preface and (surprisingly, because he was black) George W. Lowther's postscript, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* is, as the title emphatically declares, *Written By Herself*. Who then, is the "narrative" narrated to? Who is the intermediary, the authenticator? Who makes this story safe? The answer is simple, and of utmost importance: the narrative, which begins "reader," is narrated directly to that reader. The interlocutor[27]

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[27]The *American Heritage Dictionary* offers as a secondary meaning of "interlocutor" this highly fascinating definition: "The performer in a minstrel show who is placed midway between the end men and engages in banter with them." This resonates with this thesis because of between of the interlocutor's position between two constructed racial

becomes both Jacobs herself, in so far as she directly relates the story via the text, and the white reader, in so far as she reads that text. The responsibility for making the text palatable, and for drawing attention to blind spots, is placed directly on Jacobs and her readership.

With Jacobs as her own mediator, the issue of veracity becomes extremely important. Just as slaves' testimony had no authority in a court of law,[28] so Jacobs' testimony as a fugitive slave amounts to that of a non-authority. As those of a black woman, Jacobs' experiences can, according to prevailing conventions, only be authenticated for white readers by the "good word" of a white friend, yet that word is present only in a short preface to a volume "written by herself." In her first sentence, therefore, Jacobs reflects the bind she is in. "Reader, be assured this narrative [which, in the sense that it is not narrated to a white mediator, is no narrative] is no fiction." Her story cannot be authenticated without the white intermediary voice, but it will not be her story if it is authenticated by that voice. The mediating presence of a white "liberator" creates a "speechless agony" in the black slave's ability to communicate her experience, not because she is naturally unable to express herself, but because the benevolence of the liberating figure creates in the liberator's mind a definition of the slave as silent sufferer. Since black women were denied the right to speak at all in proper discourse, "narratives

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identities will be central to this paper. The very phenomenon of minstrel shows, theatrical presentations in which white men wore black-face and acted out their constructions of black-identity, is an extremely interesting in relation to this thesis. The politics of white actors donning black face in order to both *denigrate* (another fascinating and disturbingly germane etymology: from the Latin *denigrare*, or, *to blacken*) and appropriate "black" identity is very interesting, as is the fact that as the form developed, black actors who wished to perform for a white audience found it necessary to wear black-face as well -- in other words, black actors had to don a stereotyped/constructed black identity, and it was only from behind that "mask that grins and lies" that they could criticize the construction itself. ******SOURCE

[28]See Higgenbotham, p. 124

by [them] embody the tension between the author's desire to privilege her experience and her ability to speak only within a discourse of conventionally held beliefs about the nature of black womanhood" (Carby, 22). It is this tension, operative throughout *Incidents*, which has troubled so many readers. Not looking between the poles of truth/falsehood, readers such as John Blassingame have felt that if Jacobs is restricted in how she tells her story by the form in which she must tell it, if, in other words she cannot "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," then her story must be false. Readers such as Alice A. Deck, believing Jacobs' narrative to be "authentic", nevertheless feel that the authenticity of Jacobs' black female slave experience lies somewhere *beneath* the falsifying trappings of the story.[29] I would suggest that a more fruitful question than "is this story true, " or "how is Jacobs oppressed by the genres she of necessity employs," is "how is Jacobs using the forms she has available?"

Having tackled and claimed "narrative" for herself, Jacobs continues in her first sentence to tackle and undermine the conventions of sentimentality even as she adopts the sentimental form. While it functions as a claim to veracity, it is extremely important that Jacobs chose to specifically term her narrative "no fiction." Fiction, as it was employed by white abolitionists, was a form which Jacobs needed, as a black woman writing about her sexual experience, to distance herself from. In the novels and stories written by white female abolitionists for a white female abolitionist audience,[30] slave bodies and experiences were written and read in such a way as to silence and

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[29]I will not be using Deck's article when analyzing the book's reception, but I found it exemplary of a certain kind of reading. See Alice A. Deck, "Whose Book is This?: Authorial Versus (sic) Editorial Control of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself.*"

[30]For examples of and critical work on these novels and stories, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler's "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition."

appropriate those bodies and experiences for white consumption. Rather than textualizing the light-skinned "black" body in order to destabilize the polarization of race, these antebellum writers used the "mulatta" to buttress that polarization.

According to the conventions of sentimentality, "the self is externally displayed and the body provides a reliable sign of who one is" (Sánchez-Eppler, 36). White abolitionist sentimental writers were therefore confronted with the problem of how, when white is good and black is bad, when white is beautiful and black is ugly, to "depict a black body that can be instantly recognized. . . as a hero or a heroine" (Sánchez-Eppler, 37). Many solved this problem by writing tales of the tragic mulatta, a "black" woman with very light skin. At first glance this move may appear a questioning of the polarized construction of race through acknowledgement of the mutability of race. In fact, the white abolitionists' fictional mulatta preserved racial boundaries. She was a heroine who, because of her "whiteness," could be sympathized with but who also, because of her "blackness," could and must fall sexually. Sánchez-Eppler suggests that this pattern "demonstrates the usefulness of the slave woman for the white woman's sexuality, and particularly the usefulness of the mulatta, who in being part white and part black. . . simultaneously embodies self and other" (42). The white reader could vicariously experience sexuality through reading the body of the fictional mulatta under the guise of antislavery "sentiment." The fictional mulatta, in her story of virtue soiled, *embodied* what for a true (white) woman was unacknowledgeable: the space between virtue and sexual depravity, which involves desire and the reality of sexual abuse.

But because the "white" body of the fictional mulatta is really "black," the white reader need never allow the titillating glimpse of that space

between to impinge upon her true womanhood. The white reader can sympathetically follow the fictional mulatta into the forbidden realm of sexual desire and sexual abuse, but, at the point at which the fictional mulatta inevitably "falls," the white reader can re-polarize her understanding of race -- color the mulatta "black" and herself "white" -- and maintain her adherence to true womanhood. The figure of the fictional mulatta, therefore, while her situation between the races is acknowledged and used in abolitionist fiction, is not an indicator of a space between the poles of black and white. As Sánchez-Eppler points out, the body of the fictional mulatta "embodies self and other," or, in other words, maintains the dichotomy of race rather than unsettling it. The body is self in so far as it is "white" and strives toward virtue, other in so far as it is "black" and must therefore fall.

Once fallen, the tragic mulatta must, of course, die. The well-rehearsed misogyny inherent in the ever-repeated death of fallen (white) women is quite evident here. But Sánchez-Eppler sees another, equally disturbing trend in the fact that "the freedom offered by antislavery fiction regularly depends upon killing off black bodies, defining death as a glorious emancipation from plantation slavery" (51). The obliteration of darkness from the bodies of black heroines in order to make white readers sympathetic while still maintaining "blackness" in order to keep that sympathy at a safe distance, and the achievement of freedom through death, which, while envisioning freedom for slaves, also envisions the destruction of black bodies, make sentimental abolitionist fiction a dangerous genre for Harriet Jacobs to adopt.

Jacobs addresses and rejects the vision of freedom which calls for the death of the black body. Although she couches her rejection by professing love for Miss Fanny, the old white woman who wishes a sentimental death on her, Jacobs clearly takes her to task for her condescending and morbid wish

"that I and all my grandmother's family were at rest in our graves, for not until then should she feel any peace about us" (Jacobs, 89). Jacobs acerbically comments that "The good old soul did not dream that I was planning to bestow peace upon her, with regard to myself and my children; not by death, but by securing our freedom" (Jacobs, 89). Since Miss Fanny pointedly does not desire Jacobs' freedom, one suspects that not only would she rather see Jacobs dead than tormented by Dr. Flint, she would also rather see her dead than free. This hint, along with Jacobs' sarcastic reference to how she intends to "bestow peace upon her," acknowledges and dismisses as offensive the perversely romantic and violent notion of emancipation through death.

By claiming that her "narrative is no fiction," Jacobs suggests in her very first sentence that her text should not be seen in the light of abolitionist fiction. This mulatta character will not fulfill the sexualized self/other polarity for white women's vicarious enjoyment. Nor will she take part in the killing of black bodies, her own or anyone else's. To this end, Jacobs uses the convention of sentimentality just as she uses words and sentences. Even as she adopts the genre of the sentimental novel, she refuses to use and in fact works to destroy the conventions of sentimentality and the destructive representations of black bodies which the figure of the fictional mulatta and the death of the black body in abolitionist fiction mandate. Those sites of sentimental interdiction become and are maintained in Jacobs' text as sites of inter diction, where Jacobs, through suggesting its constructedness, refuses to capitulate to the polarized understanding of race.

The power of *Incidents'* spaces between lies not in any utopian realization of or even in a desire for the realization of a non-polarized understanding of race. Rather, its power lies in its constant potential to suggest blind spots in the readers' racial understandings, spots which, because

they are unrecognized, serve to naturalize and buttress racist ideologies. This unwavering suggestive power is carried out to and reinforced by the end of the narrative.[31] *Incidents* , in my reading, ends both powerfully, and, in its vision of "freedom" and American race relations, without placation or resolution.

In the second-to-last paragraph, Jacobs writes two "logical" last sentences to her narrative. "Reader," she writes, mirroring her first sentence, "my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!" (Jacobs, 201). This, like the opening sentence, is a complicated refusal of both the slave narrative form, and the conventions of sentimentality. Seen as a slave narrative, the story does end in the usual way. The arrival at the North, often presented as synonymous with freedom, is the goal and end of many slave narratives. By claiming that freedom is an unusual ending for her story, and that the usual ending would be marriage, Jacobs aligns herself more strongly with the sentimental tradition, a move which may be intended to strengthen a sense of similarity between herself and her white readership. But she only alludes to *Incidents'* sentimental leanings in order to refute them; the story does not end in marriage, and, as the sentence is constructed, marriage is made distinctly separate from freedom. The text thus slides out from under both the slave narrative genre and the conventions of sentimentality. The reader, used to mediated endings, is left as her own interlocutor, with Jacobs' "freedom" unmediated

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[31]Nellie McKay, in her 1987 article, "Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon," claims that at the close of *Incidents*, Jacobs "tell us of her success in finding employment after her escape, and of the happy union she had with her children in the North" (McKay, 253). This simplification of the text down to its "happy ending" plot elements is, I think, a prime example of a reader not "looking" inter dicta. Thus the ending can be, and it has been, read as placidly and benignly "happy."

by convention. To this extent, Jacobs frees herself from categorical conventions as well as from slavery.

But *Incidents* does not end on this note. If Jacobs refuses to cushion "freedom" in well-recited literary tradition, she also doesn't allow "freedom" to cushion the end of her story. "Freedom" is a metaphor, like "race." Like "race," however, it is a metaphor which, because of legal and linguistic interdictions, has great effects on lived experience. Jacobs continues, "We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in *my* condition" (Jacobs, 201). "Freedom" is contextualized to mean "freedom from the power of slaveholders." While it is an enormous and wonderful achievement, her "freedom" means only that Jacobs is no longer legally owned by Dr. Flint. Jacobs does not extend "freedom" any further than that specific legal interdiction which she has overcome.

Early in the text, Jacobs defines white women's freedom by their ability to take care of their children without interference. At the end Jacobs points out that this sort of freedom is exactly what she has not achieved: "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own" (Jacobs, 201). On page sixteen, Jacobs specifically draws attention to the difference between free mothers and slave mothers. Addressing "you happy free women" directly, Jacobs writes, "Children bring their little offerings, and raise their rosy lips for a caress. They are your own, and no hand but that of death can take them from you" (Jacobs, 16). On the day before the New Year's auction, however, the slave mother "sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she

and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies" (Jacobs, 16). This absolute distinction between slave women's and free white women's experience haunts even the end of her story. The "brutalizing system" which creates the dichotomy between white and slave motherhood is not directly recalled at the book's close, but it is suggested by the continued textual insistence on the complicity of the North with Southern slavery, coupled with Jacobs' refusal to equate the North with an ideal of "freedom."

The second to last paragraph ends when, as feminist critic Nellie McKay interprets it, Jacobs "tell[s] us of her success in finding employment after her escape" (McKay, 253). I think the end of this paragraph in fact creates a suggestive inconsistency in her representation of "freedom." After her indictment of Northern "freedom" Jacobs writes: "But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend [and employer], Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children" (Jacobs, 201). Mrs. Bruce "bestowed" freedom on Jacobs by buying her from Dr. Flint's inheritors. When Mrs. Bruce tells Jacobs of her intention to buy her, Jacobs says that "The more my mind had become enlightened the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property. . . . I wrote to Mrs. Bruce, thanking her, but saying that being sold from one owner to another seemed too much like slavery; that such a great obligation could not be easily cancelled; and that I preferred to go to my brother in California" (Jacobs, 199). Jacobs clearly states that her personal integrity and her own understanding of what freedom means will not bear the sale of her body, and she specifically asks that the end,

her "freedom," not be made to justify the means by which it is achieved. However, "By the next mail I received this brief letter from Mrs. Bruce: 'I am rejoiced to tell you that the money for your freedom has been paid to Mr. Dodge [Jacobs' new owner]. Come home to-morrow. I long to see you and my sweet babe" (Jacobs, 199-200). The devastating irony that Jacobs' "freedom" was procured for her against her will through the sale of her own body is made very clear in her telling of the story. I also do not think it is an accident that she quotes Mrs. Bruce's exact words: "The money for your freedom has been paid. . . . Come home to-morrow." This "freedom" has strings attached, strings which allow Mrs. Bruce to authoritatively say "come home [back to work] to-morrow," even when Jacobs has stated her intention to make her home with her brother in California. Just as Jacobs feared, "such a great obligation [Jacobs' responsibility to Child for her purchase] could not be easily cancelled" (Jacobs, 199). This means by which Jacobs' freedom was obtained, and her vehement reaction to it,[32] seem incongruous with her humble expressions of gratitude a few paragraphs later.[33] Having made it

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[32]Jacobs' reaction to Mrs. Bruce's letter is, for me, one of the strongest pieces of writing in the book, both for its expository effect, and for its direct address to future readers, not only of the bill of sale itself, but of the *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "My brain reeled as I read these lines. A gentleman near me said, 'It's true; I have seen the bill of sale.' 'The bill of sale!' Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it. I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his" (Jacobs, 200).

[33]Jacobs has Mrs. Bruce explain, when Jacobs arrives home, that "I did not buy you for your services. I should have done just the same, if you had been going to sail for California tomorrow. I should, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that you left me a free woman" (Jacobs, 200), and Jacobs repents of her initial reaction. In spite of this careful explanation, I still see the dichotomy between the vehemence of Jacobs' initial reaction and the humility of her final statement, a dichotomy which perhaps hides a space between worth examining.

clear that she does not want any obligations to Mrs. Bruce, suddenly "Love, duty, gratitude also *bind* me to her side. It is a privilege to *serve* her who pities my oppressed people" (italics mine). This servile language is a surprise after Jacobs has made it quite clear that the purchase of her freedom "would take from my sufferings the glory of triumph" (Jacobs, 199).

The second to last paragraph contradicts itself for a reason. The paragraph begins with a sharp refusal to adopt "freedom" as an easy ending, rather implying that the word as a metaphor "is not saying a great deal," then moves through Jacobs' sense of non-fulfillment as a "free" woman and mother, and ends with a humble thank-you to Mrs Bruce for granting her "the inestimable boon of freedom." Jacobs suggests in this fracturing of consistency, expectation, and "truth," a space between the polarized understanding not only of black and white, but of slavery and freedom. Freedom is not only destabilized in its non-implicated position as the opposite of slavery, but it is also fundamentally questioned as an ontological possibility, just as the very existence of "race" as a viable idea is called into question by Jacobs' suggestion of the space between racial polarities. Jacobs' presentation of Northern complicity with Southern slavery, contrasted in the second to last paragraph with her servile relationship to Mrs. Bruce, serves to complicate and question "freedom," which, in its constructed fundamental difference from slavery, makes invisible the involvement of all Americans with slavery. This "vision" problematizes race relations by linking "freedom" with the conditions of slavery, thus implicating everyone, including "her who pities my oppressed people," in those conditions.

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Similar to the way the text of *Incidents* tacks back and forth in order to suggest spaces between, so readings of the text have, across time, oscillated between polarities, establishing various and differing authorities which repolarize the destabilized elements in the text. Just as Jacobs' body could not deconstruct the conceptual polarity of race in spite of her body's physical manifestation of the hypocrisy of that construction, so the text has often been read as an unfractured representative of one pole, as in Blassingame's original insistence that the book is by a white woman, or as concealing somewhere beneath its fractured surface an "authentic" and unfractured Jacobs, as in Joanne M. Braxton's interpretation of Jacobs as the archetypical "outraged mother" figure. But as critic Hazel Carby insists, in writing about the conflicting ideologies of black and white womanhood under slavery, "stereotypes only appear to exist in isolation while actually depending on a nexus of figuration which can be explained only in relation to each other" (Carby, 20). The desire to claim an authentic black experience from *Incidents*, or to take its ambiguous relationship to "white" language and forms as a sign of its inauthenticity, ignores the constructedness of "black" experience as opposite and separate from "white" experience. Jacobs' text does not contain an incongruous use of "white" language and genre forms by a "black" woman, or vice versa. It is an explosion of those forms from within, by someone whose body and text are, in very complicated ways, at the "nexus of [racial] figurations."

The tension which results from the use of "white" language and "white" form has complicated readings of the text ever since it was written. If we see that tension as a reconstruction/deconstruction of the ambiguities and hypocrisies of the slave system itself, a system whose polarized ideologies of race and gender "appear to exist in isolation while actually depending on a

nexus of figurations which can be explained only in relation to each other," then the text's receptions begin to suggest as much if not more about the understandings and cultural constructions of the people reading the book as they do about the book itself. Acknowledging this, the reader becomes "free" to recognize his or her position as historically and racially situated. To not do this is to run the risk of reading the language and the form of the text as simply and as stereotypically as Jacobs' enslaved body was read in the 1830s and 40s. The racial blind spot, after all, has evolved along with American society and still polarizes American vision.

If recognizing one's own context is of utmost importance to the reading of *Incidents*, it becomes necessary to recognize, in addition to Jacobs' position as intermediary between her experience and her intended audience, the reader's cultural, racial and historical position as itself an interlocutor between text and understanding. The book begins with the word "reader," and continues throughout to address its audience directly, as in "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!" (Jacobs, 54). In her plea, Jacobs makes it clear that the power of interpretation does not lie with the reader in isolation. She contextualizes her readers, begging of those for whom the laws, the interdictions, work, that they "do not judge. . . too severely." The institution of "race" which creates the material and conceptual differences between Jacobs and her audience, although greatly altered by the passage of time and the resulting changes in society, are still, if differently, with us today.[34] The history of the reception of *Incidents* is as

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[34]A. Leon Higgenbotham's epilogue helped me arrive at this thought. He writes of how "Shortly before Chief Justice Earl Warren died, I spoke with him in great detail about

much a history of black and white readers' relationships to the manifestations of the polarized construction of race in their particular America, as it is a history of readers' relationship to any single text. Thus, as I will attempt to show, the resulting interpretations of the text say a great deal about the cultural blind spots of the people reading it. Recognizing that my reading is profoundly subjective and that I am very much the product and mouthpiece of my own context,[35] I would like, after examining three responses to Jacobs, to suggest that just as the existence of conceptual blind spots between the polarities which I see Jacobs as subtilely deconstructing are perhaps what we can hope most clearly to "see" while reading the text, so the context of my own position in a history of receptions of *Incidents* is perhaps what I can best "see" or at least acknowledge.

Published privately in December, 1860, *Incidents* did not enter the market at a profitable time. As Jean Fagan Yellin puts it, "as the nation moved toward civil war, yet another slave narrative seemed of minor importance" (Introduction to *Incidents*, xxiv). The book attracted some attention among white abolitionists, however, and in February, 1861, the

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my ten year research effort on the issue of colonial slavery. He responded: 'I would be especially interested in seeing you at this particular time because of a reappraisal of my own thinking concerning slavery -- not only what it meant in the past but the danger of what it will still mean to the future.' I concur with the concern expressed by Chief Justice Warren that the impact of our heritage of slave laws will continue to make itself felt into the future. For there is a nexus between the brutal centuries of colonial slavery and the racial polarization and anxieties of today. The poisonous legacy of legalized oppression based on the matter of color can never be adequately purged from our society if we act as if slave laws had never existed" (Higgenbotham, 391).

[35]Although I am relegating my disclaimers to the end, I was never the less inspired by Judith Butler's introduction to "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," after which she writes, "I have begun with confessions of trepidation and a series of disclaimers, but perhaps it will become clear that *disclaiming*, which is no simple activity, will be what I have to offer as a form of affirmative resistance to a certain regulatory operation of homophobia [or, in this case, the regulatory operation of traditional academic reading and writing which, as a matter of course, makes invisible and repolarizes blind spots]" (Butler, 15).

National Anti-Slavery Standard [36] ran a letter which, while it mainly compared *Incidents* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, also discussed the book's own merits, "approving its lack of sensationalism, and deploring its occasional moralizing" (Introduction to *Incidents*, xxiv) This, then, was one contemporary response to *Incidents*, written by a member (sex unidentified) of the text's originally intended audience, and addressed to more members of that audience. I have chosen to concentrate on it because, as a response published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, it reached a wide abolitionist audience, and because it expresses a reading of the text which I find interesting given the text's manipulation of genre and convention for the benefit of exactly that audience:

> It is by no means an extreme picture of the delicate institution. The writer never suffers personal chastisement, and meets with white friends who comfort and assist. Her chief persecutor, a physician in good repute and practice, seems to have been subjected to all restraints that Southern public opinion can put on a professional man. . . A few sentences in which the moral is rather oppressively displayed, might have been omitted with advantage. These, it is to be wished, Mrs. Child had felt herself authorized to expunge. They are the strongest witnesses who leave the summing up to the judge, and the verdict to the jury. (Introduction to *Incidents*, xxiv).

This reaction to *Incidents* is an example of the antebellum reader's insistence on the polarization of race, the polarization of North and South, and the control of "black" experience and expression by "white" interlocutors. The reader's blind spots, to the complicity of Northern whites in the

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[36]Lydia Maria Child, Jacobs' editor, edited the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* from 1841 to 1843. As "the first woman in America to edit a newspaper directed to an issue of public policy" (Yellin, 56), Child had constantly to battle "the charge that her sex would bias her work" (Yellin, 56). Yellin provides a very helpful discussion of the complicated relationship between feminism and abolitionism throughout *Women and Sisters*, and especially in relation to Child's tenure at the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on pp. 56-60.

institution of slavery and to the constructedness of the polarity of race, are stalwartly maintained. The book is recommended because it is deemed palatable to its intended white audience. White people are not categorically dismissed, and in fact, the reader can identify with "white friends who comfort and assist." Thus reading the book as safely mediated, the white reader does not have to acknowledge his or her complicity in the institution of slavery.

That the book is described for what it doesn't do, rather than for what it does, and the enigmatic terms "delicate institution" and "personal chastisement," echo *Incident's* own careful maneuverings around what could and couldn't be said to polite white women. What, for example, does "personal chastisement" mean? Jacobs certainly suffers verbal abuse, and she is once struck down by Dr. Flint. Is the reader alluding to the fact that Jacobs is not raped by Dr. Flint?[37] Equally enigmatic is the description of Dr. Flint's position in Southern society, which discusses the ways which he is restrained, something Jacobs never does, as opposed to how he is violently manipulative and abusive. The book is praised not for its representation of "the delicate institution," but for its representation of whites.

The white reader, reassured, is then reminded of the mediating presence of Lydia Maria Child. What fault this writer finds, he or she blames not on Jacobs' skill as an author, but on Child's lack of control over the text. Did this writer mean by "the moral" those places where Jacobs condemns the institution of slavery? Or those places where Jacobs implicates the North in the institution of slavery? Or where Jacobs calls the white women of the North to action? Whichever of those moments of direct exhortation and

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[37]If so, "personal chastisement" is a very telling euphemism, chastisement carrying with it the implication of some misdemeanor.

undisguised intent this writer may be referring to, he or she effectively disempowers those moments by transferring the "authority" of the text to Lydia Maria Child. This writer is not interested in "the moral." Rather he or she wishes that Child had taken a greater role as interlocutor between the text and the white readership. The excerpt concludes with the writer's opinion that "They are the strongest witnesses who leave the summing up the judge, and the verdict to the jury." Suffice it to say that in the Northern and Southern United (or disunited) States in 1861, judges and juries were comprised solely of white men. Authority is thus transferred to Child and the readers, through a reference to the institutionalized arbiters who upheld and maintained the legal interdictions which naturalized white supremacy in the United States. Clearly this reader, by using the metaphor of the court, solidly maintains his or her blind spots to the constructedness of the polarized understanding of race.

Having made a small impact in the early 1860's, *Incidents* quickly fell into obscurity, probably due to the emancipation of the slaves and the slow dissolution of the abolitionist movement. As Yellin relates, when the book was remembered, it was remembered confusedly: "Some thought it a narrative dictated by a fugitive slave, Jacobs, to Child; others thought it an antislavery novel that Child had written in the form of a slave narrative" (Introduction to *Incidents*, xxv). Thus, when John Blassingame discounted the "veracity" of *Incidents* in his influential 1972 history, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South,* he was responding not only to what he saw in the text, but to a history of confused and ambivalent readings of it which had placed it partially if not wholly in the hands of a white writer.

The Slave Community was a very influential history of slavery, one of the first, as Blassingame himself notes, to "explore. . . the life experiences of American slaves" (Blassingame, vii). He relied heavily upon slave narratives to determine "how blacks felt about the conditions under which they lived" (Blassingame, 228), but in order to research this, Blassingame had to confront the idea that "few men are able to tell the *whole* truth about themselves," and the question of whether or not any given narrative is "representative" and "reliable." Very concerned with the issue of authority and veracity, Blassingame provides a "Critical Essay on Sources" at the end of his book, in which he explains his methods of verification, and explains why two narratives, *Aunt Sally: Or the Cross the Way to Freedom,* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* do not stand up to his criteria.[38] Although he has since reversed his opinion, in 1972 Blassingame maintained that "in spite of Lydia Maria Child's insistence that she had only revised the manuscript of Harriet Jacobs 'mainly for the purpose of condensation and orderly arrangement,' the work is not credible" (Blassingame, 234). Where the 1861 reader found Child's presence too diluted, Blassingame a century later finds the text too mediated: "In the first place, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is too orderly; too many of the major characters meet providentially after years of separation. . . . Then, too, the story is too melodramatic: miscegenation and cruelty, outraged virtue, unrequited love, and planter licentiousness appear on practically every page" (Blassingame, 234). In addition to a blind spot regarding gender, Blassingame's blind spot polarizes the conventions of

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[38]Blassingame's methods are clearly sexist. Not only are the two discounted narratives by women, but Blassingame consistently refers to slaves as "he." The most glaring example of this that I found was the way in which he introduced one of the women's narratives: "In some of the fictional accounts, the major character may have been a real fugitive, but the narrative of his life is probably false. *Aunt Sally: Or the Cross the Way to Freedom. . .* is a good example of the type" (Blassingame, 233).

sentimentality and the conventions of slave narrative, which amounts to a polarization of truth and falsehood. He condemns the narrative for exactly those adoptions of the sentimental convention which made it palatable to its 1861 white female audience, while acknowledging none of the complicated manipulations of that convention which suggest exactly the spaces between polarities which his reading is blind to, namely, the space between truth and fiction, authority and non-authority. The text emerges, still powerfully enigmatic, from between a reading by a Civil War era white reader who could accept nothing Jacobs said unmediated, and a reading by a 1972 black historian for whom the mediating genre choice spelled falsehood.

In 1981 Jean Fagan Yellin was able, through the use of letters and meticulous historical research, to "authenticate [Jacobs'] authorship" (Introduction to *Incidents*, xxv). Since that time the book has received enormous academic attention, to the extent that it was taught in three different classes at Oberlin just this semester.[39] This official authentication, combined with a contemporary movement on the part of some black feminists to define an essence of black femaleness,[40] prepared the ground for Joanne M. Braxton's 1986 Massachusetts Review article, "Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Re-Definition of the Slave Narrative Genre." In this article Braxton outlines what she sees as the distinctions between men's and women's slave narratives, establishing for black American women "a mystic sisterhood. . . we live our lives within a magic

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[39]These classes were: American Women's History, Black Women in America, and American Romanticism.

[40]This is, of course, still a current issue in many feminisms, some defined as and/or defining themselves as "white," some defined as and/or defining themselves as "black." For a good discussion of the issues and problems in black feminist theory current in 1986, see Hazel Carby's chapter, "Women's Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory," in *Reconstructing Womanhood*. This chapter speaks strongly against "essentialism," a "position" I align myself with.

circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness" (Braxton, 379). Braxton employs unfortunate and reductive stereotypes in order to place Harriet Jacobs in the position of the "outraged mother," an archetype who, "With her hands on her hips and her head covered with a bandana" stands "at the core of our black and female experience, this American Amazon of African descent, dwelling in the moral and psychic wilderness of North America" (Braxton, 380). The textual example Braxton uses to establish Jacobs' archetypal black motherhood, however, undermines her very assertion of that point. She writes, "The outraged mother resists her situation not so much on behalf of herself as on behalf of her children. . . 'I knew the doom that awaited my fair baby in slavery, and I determined to save her from it, or perish in the attempt'" (Braxton, 387). In this quote, intended to illustrate Jacobs' essential nature as a black woman, Jacobs specifically names her daughter's skin color, "fair," thus alluding to the heightened sexual commodification of light-skinned slave women. Again, through one little word slipped in, Jacobs suggests the fallacy of the naturalizing myth of "race," which in antebellum American supposedly justified slave status based on an immutable polarity of skin color, but which was in fact a violently reinforced ontology of oppression founded on legal and linguistic interdictions. In my opinion, the quote Braxton chose points to the blind spot between the polarized construction of race, a blind spot Braxton herself reinscribes in her article.

And so I come to the moment of this thesis. Today, April 20th, 1993, I got on the elevator at Main Level, interrupting the conversation of three black women who then rode in silence with me up to the third floor. The elevator stopped and before the door opened, one of them said to another, or to me, "Someone had better erase that before the wrong person reads it." I

looked at the elevator wall as I walked out behind them. "Rodney King Deserved It" was scrawled in ballpoint pen next to the emergency stop switch.

And I unlocked my scholar study and sat down at my computer to write the conclusion to a long academic paper about how the trope of "race," which is still violently enacted and reenacted in America, is handled by Harriet Jacobs and the readers of *Incidents*. Legal and linguistic interdictions. Spaces between. Blind spots. Suggestions. Myself, white, writing about Harriet Jacobs, black, writing.

Who was the wrong person, if not them, if not me? Based on where this thesis has led me, I wonder if the four of us in that elevator weren't already tied together in a silence which at least for me was based on "race," on my fear of "race," my desire to situate myself on the "right" side of the polarities resulting from "race," my fears that all I do, or all I can do, is occupy the "wrong" pole, the oppressive, appropriative, racist pole. Didn't the writing on the wall tie us together in a polarity of identity based on "race?" Weren't we all readers, though very different readers, of "race," of the brutal re-enforcement of "race," and weren't we brutalized into polarized categories, not for the first time, but again, as we are, and as I know I unconsciously facilitate, through tinier brutalities many times a day? I do not mean to suggest that "white," because it is constantly repolarized over against "black" is therefore a sister in oppression. I mean that the violence, directed from "white" against "black" of "Rodney King Deserved It," given the legal history of the Rodney King beating and its aftermath, recalls present day legal interdictions as well as enacts linguistic interdictions which help construct and maintain a radically unbalanced and oppressive understanding of "race" in America. This institutionalized white supremacy, recreated constantly in American culture, makes it impossible for me, in reading and writing about

Incidents, to divorce myself from my context as a white woman. *Incidents*, after all, is not primarily about the ways, powerful or disturbing, that "black" and "white" cultures, informed as they are by "race", play themselves out independently of one another, but rather speaks from and to the violence and silencing which African Americans suffered in the antebellum United States when people came into contact as "black" and "white," polarized against and therefore defined in violent relation to one another. Given that history, and the history of racial interdictions in America since then, I can only read *Incidents* as a woman who is white, a white woman trying to see through the use of inter diction in the text, the blind spots in my culture and myself which reproduce "race" at every turn.

But looking for my own blind spots is, as I wrote in a very different context many pages ago, an act of looking which is impossible, although perhaps it is all I can do, vigilantly, constantly. To try, vigilantly and constantly, to recognize the violent constructedness of the pole of "race" I occupy, and acknowledge my own complicity in that construction. And in doing so, I hope I become a woman who is white writing consciously about race. More explicitly, I hope I become an/other white woman reading *Incidents* not only to reach "a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage," but to reach some sort of understanding about myself personally as a "raced" American, and about my cultural, intellectual, economic and political circumstances as they affect and are implicated in the cultural, intellectual, economic and political circumstances of other, differently "raced" Americans. I hope that my attempts to recognize, to "see" where others have stood and where I stand in relation to *Incidents*, and how those positions have functioned and still function in the construction of "race" as a whole are, if not helpful to other

readers of *Incidents*, at least a step in a good direction for me personally, in my relationship to my position, responsibility, and future as an active and hopefully contributing white American woman.

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